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Labour's Council of Action 1920

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In August 1920 war between the Allied powers and Russia over the Polish question suddenly appeared imminent. Meeting in the House of Commons on 9 August, the Labour Party and the TUC warned the government that the 'whole industrial power of the organized workers' would be used to defeat it. A Council of Action was set up to take such steps as might be necessary to carry the meeting's decisions into effect. Four days later a special conference endorsed the formation of the Council and the threat of industrial action to stop the war. He had always been opposed to direct action, Jimmy Thomas explained, when the same result could be obtained through the ballot box. On this occasion, however, 'no Parliamentary means could do what we are asking you to do, and desperate as are our means, dangerous as they are, we believe that the disease is so desperate and dangerous that it is only desperate and dangerous methods that can provide a remedy'. The resolution upon which they had agreed was not a simple 'down tools' policy. 'It is nothing of the kind. If this resolution is to be given effect to it means a challenge to the whole Constitution of the country (Cheers).'¹ Indeed only the victory of the Polish forces in the field, the *Fortnightly Review* (June 1921) suggested, had 'miraculously saved this country from an attempt to introduce the Dictatorship of the Proletariat in accordance with the Russian precedent'.

This paper will outline the composition and activity of the Council, and of the several hundred local Councils which

¹ Council of Action: *Report of the Special Conference on Labour and the Russo-Polish war in the Central Hall, Westminster, on 13 August 1920* (London 1920), 3, 14, 16. References to the Conference will be taken from this source unless otherwise indicated. All dates refer to 1920 unless otherwise indicated.

were set up under its auspices. It will examine the claim of Labour spokesmen that the formation of the Council prevented British intervention in the Russo-Polish conflict, and will look at the Council's attempt, once the immediate crisis had passed, to prevent the manufacture and export of munitions and military supplies. It will be concerned, finally, to examine the nature and political inspiration of the Councils movement as a whole. It will be suggested that while there were those who supported the Soviet cause because it was the socialist cause, a rather more prominent motive was opposition to war in whatever circumstances. Both the National and the local Councils refused communist participation in all but exceptional cases; and they saw their action as an affirmation of the constitution rather than its denial. In a situation in which war appeared imminent all could agree to oppose it by the only means at the disposal of the labour movement. It was otherwise once the crisis had passed.

The Polish offensive in Russia was launched, it appeared to labour circles, with the connivance of the Allied powers. It enjoyed a considerable initial success. The Polish advance was resisted and eventually checked, however, by the Red Army, which began to counter-attack. Armistice negotiations broke down at the beginning of August, and the Red Army continued to advance, apparently meeting little resistance. It seemed possible that British forces might be sent to intervene in order to preserve Polish independence and the Versailles settlement. The *Times* warned on 6 and 7 August that the situation was comparable with that of August 1914. The *Review of Reviews* on 8 August declared that the continent faced a situation which threatened not only to undo the whole work of the peace treaty, but 'even to plunge the continent once again into the ghastly nightmare of war'. The *Herald* noted on 5 August that, six years after the government's declaration of a War to end Wars', the country was 'again in urgent danger of a great war'. Unless Labour wanted the return of militarism and conscription, and children 'dragged away and butchered . . . *act now* . . . Let the Prime Minister know that you will not have this war — that you will down tools from one end of the country to the other rather

than fight a wanton war or allow it to be fought'. Whatever the government's assurances, the paper's editorials emphasized on 5 and 8 August, no faith could be placed in them. 'We cannot trust the government an inch.'

Henderson, as Secretary of the Labour Party, sent a telegram on 4 August to local party branches declaring that the possibility of an extension of the Russo-Polish war was 'extremely menacing', and urging them to organize demonstrations against intervention and the supply of men and munitions to Poland (GEN/9).² It was announced three days later that the Parliamentary Labour Party, the Labour executive and the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC were to meet on the following Monday, 9 August, to consider the situation. Demonstrations took place on 6 and 7 August, and a special Sunday edition of the *Herald* pledged 'Not a Man, Not a Gun, Not a Sou'. Messages of support reached Henderson from union and ILP branches, individuals, and mass meetings.

The Labour meeting on 9 August warned that war was 'being engineered between the Allied powers and Soviet Russia on the issue of Poland'. Such a war would be an 'intolerable crime against humanity', the movement's industrial power would be used to defeat the war, and a Council of Action was set up to carry its resolutions into effect. A national conference representing local union and Labour branches was also to be held at the earliest opportunity (ADM/1-13). The Council met on the following day and decided that the conference should be held on 13 August 'whether the threatened war with Poland was averted or not' (ADM/15).

Before the conference met the Council undertook a number of initiatives. The representatives of the Russian and Polish governments were sent copies of the 9 August resolution, and the Council sought and obtained an interview with Lloyd George on 10 August, published the following day in

² References in brackets are to the Council of Action archive (Labour Party, London). A chronology of the Council's activity is contained in ADM/28. A full list of the members of the Council, with their home addresses, is in ADM/10. (The permission of the Labour Party to quote from the Archive is gratefully acknowledged).

the *Herald*. The paper also made public the official Soviet peace terms, which accepted the independence of Poland and offered a more generous boundary than the 'Curzon line' which the Allies had originally suggested. The Council wrote accordingly to Lloyd George on 11 August, presuming from their interview of the previous day that 'in view of your declaration of non-interference . . . further interference by the Allies with Russia on behalf of Poland or General Wrangel will not be proceeded with'. They hoped, further, that the government's peace terms with Russia would now be published (ADM/53). Further interviews with Lloyd George and with the Russian mission in London took place on 12 August. The Council was asked by the Prime Minister to use its influence with the Russian government to 'keep to the published Peace Terms rather than stiffen them, in view of the military successes then being achieved by the Red Army'.³

By the time the conference assembled in the Central Hall, Westminster, on 13 August, peace appeared to have been substantially preserved, provided no significant changes were made in the published Soviet peace terms. The government's plans, wrote the *Labour Leader* on 12 August, had been 'defeated by one of the most glorious instances of Labour solidarity on record'. What the conference was required to provide was less a challenge to the government than a demonstration of unity in defence of this achievement. The chairman declared that the Council had 'focused the practically unanimous opinion of this country against any more war or armed intervention in the affairs of other countries'. It had rallied public opinion so effectively that 'up to the present the government have been kept back from the slippery slope that would lead to another European conflagration (Cheers)'. He appealed to the conference to 'demonstrate the deep and united feeling existing against any action on the part of our government which would drag our people into war and

³ Labour Party: *Annual Conference Report*, 1921, 13. The proofs of the Conference proceedings are in MEM/7-13; a draft agenda is in CON/1; CON/5-70 contain notes on delegates; and CON/71-6 contains congratulatory notes. Reports of the Conference were published on 14 August in the *Herald*, the *Times*, and the *Manchester Guardian*.

abolish the prospect of peace in Europe for a long time to come'. They were not concerned, he emphasized, with the merits or demerits of the present rulers of Russia, or the vices or virtues of the Bolshevik form of government: 'the issue is far greater than that'.

Bevin presented a report on behalf of the Council of Action. The Council, he emphasized, was 'as strong on (Polish independence) as anyone else', but was convinced that the independence was not at stake, and indeed had never been at stake. It was also determined that a general peace should be achieved and maintained in the world. Clynes added that the Council believed it was 'acting and speaking not merely for the Labour movement, but that we were moulding and interpreting what we felt to be national opinion. No question of difference of method ever arose, for this was a matter in which there was no alternative. No Parliamentary or political measure, we felt, could be effective in themselves to save the country from being committed to war against its will.'

No amendments were allowed; and the conference proceeded to adopt a resolution approving the formation of the Council, and another welcoming the Russian declaration on the independence of Poland and pledging the conference to 'resist any and every form of military and naval intervention against the Soviet Government of Russia'. It should remain in being until the blockade was ended, the Soviet government was recognized, and unrestricted trading and commercial relations were restored between the two countries. A final resolution authorized the Council to take such steps as might be necessary to give effect to the decisions of the conference and the policy of the labour movement, and empowered it to impose a halfpenny levy per member upon affiliated organizations to meet its special requirements.

This was the high point of the Council's activity, although it remained in existence until almost the end of the year. On 15 August the Council was told that its representations to the Russian mission about the peace terms remaining unchanged had been communicated to Moscow, and that a reply had been received to the effect that this was indeed the Soviet

government's policy. The information was passed on to Lloyd George.⁴ It subsequently emerged that the detailed peace terms proposed by the Soviet representatives included a provision for the formation of a working-class civic militia; and Lloyd George and Signor Giolitti, meeting in Lucerne, addressed a note to the Soviet government expressing their concern regarding this stipulation. The Council immediately arranged an interview with the Russian mission, and a telegram was eventually received from Moscow conceding the point. The Council again urged Lloyd George to publish the terms upon which the government would make peace with Russia (FOR/27).

On 14 August it was decided to send two delegates to Paris to consult the French Socialist party and the CGT. They arrived in the French capital two days later. Their visit was less than entirely successful, however, as their report made clear, and their activities throughout were closely watched by French plain-clothes police, who accompanied them back to Boulogne on their departure. Their report to a meeting of the Council on 20 August added that the confidential interpreter they had engaged later proved to have been a *Daily Express* journalist, who had used his experience as the basis for a report in that paper. Further meetings, they felt, were desirable, but should be held on neutral territory (ADM/16). A proposal was also made to send a delegation to observe the Russo-Polish negotiations at Riga; but the delegation failed even to leave the country. The proposal was opposed by the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC as a 'very grave mistake', but an official Soviet welcome was forwarded and it was left for the government to refuse permission for the journey.⁵

The Council did not in the event call for the withdrawal of labour as it had been empowered to do. 'Peace with Russia' demonstrations were arranged for Sunday 22 August, and a series of propaganda leaflets was issued. A manifesto entitled 'Peace with Soviet Russia . . . : manifesto to the workers of Great Britain', demanded 'peace at once, a full peace, with recognition and trading rights and commercial relationships'.

⁴ *Annual Conference Report*, 1921, 14.

⁵ *ibid.*

Some six thousand were persuaded to demonstrate in London; but, according to the *Times* report the following day, the numbers elsewhere were rather less. At Bradford, where there was a downpour of rain, only three hundred appeared. Further demonstrations were organized on 17 October on the relationship between trade with Soviet Russia and unemployment (ADM/23). The heading of a printed handbill issued by the Council at this time indicated the manner in which the 'Russian question' was now regarded. It read 'Peace with Russia would mean for British workers Cheaper Food, Cheaper Clothes, Cheaper Fuel, Cheaper Building, and more Employment' (PRI/46).

The Council continued to meet regularly but did so less and less frequently. At its meeting on 28 September (ADM/23). Gosling and Cramp proposed that the Council recommend its own dissolution. The motion was defeated, but re-emerged at a joint meeting of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC, the Labour Party executive, and the Parliamentary Labour Party on 18 October, when it was agreed that the Council should remain in existence 'until the Russian question has been satisfactorily settled', although an alternative motion in favour of disbandment secured as many as eighteen votes (ADM/24).

It might almost have been successful. A good many people, the *Manchester Guardian* remarked on 13 November, had 'probably almost forgotten by this time the existence of the Council of Action established some time ago to deal with the question of peace with Russia'. The Council, it reported, had not met regularly of late, but it was 'now preparing to take a hand should any further complication arise in the negotiations for the re-opening of trade with Russia'. The Council itself explained, in a leaflet issued at this time, that 'after a necessary suspension of activities due to the Miners' Strike and other causes' it had 'decided to reopen the fight with the Government to secure Peace and Trade with Russia'. A further and, it appears, final meeting was held on 23 December. According to the *Times* report the following day, a statement was prepared for discussion at the forthcoming Labour Party Conference on the Irish question.

THIS WAS NOT THE WHOLE STORY. In addition to the National Council of Action, some three or four hundred local Councils were also established. A sub-committee of the National Council, meeting on 10 August, decided that a special manifesto should be issued and published in the Herald urging local Trades Councils and Labour Party branches to act as convening bodies responsible for calling special conferences for the purpose of electing such local Councils, which would act in conjunction with the National Council, and set up sub-committees to deal with supply and transport, strike arrangements and publicity (ADM/14). A further circular issued on 17 August made detailed suggestions along these lines. It emphasized that the Councils were 'not in any way to usurp the powers of Trade Union Executives, especially in so far as the withdrawal of labour is concerned, but are to act as centres of information'. A careful watch should be kept upon local developments, and suspected movements of men or munitions should be reported without delay to the National Council (PRI/53).

The *Times* reported on 16 August that the proposal had been 'adopted without delay in industrial areas', and four days later the National Council was informed that 135 local Councils had so far been formed, 25 in London and 110 in the provinces (ADM/16). By the time the National Council issued its second 'Report to the Local Councils of Action' on 10 September more than three hundred were said to be in existence covering the most important industrial centres (MEM/31-5 and 42-4). Altogether 'about 350 Councils' were created (ADM/29).

In most cases the Councils were swiftly constituted through the action of the local Trades Council or Labour Party. In Leicester a local Council was formed on a provisional basis on 6 August, and was confirmed by a representative meeting of local labour organizations two days later. In Leeds the Trades Council decided on 18 August to form a 'Local Council of Action to prevent War' on the initiative of the local Labour Party. In Manchester a local Council was formed by the Trades Council at the request of a joint Labour conference, and several public meetings were held. The Batley Trades and Labour Council agreed 'after some

discussion' to form a local Council. In Glasgow the Trades Council agreed to hold a conference of local labour organizations to form a Council, which was duly constituted on 5 September. The local ILP was involved, despite some concern that the demonstration held in Glasgow on 8 August had been the occasion of some 'most offensive and improper' language. They preferred to 'keep the ILP platform free from indecency'.⁶

Here and there a local organization showed considerable vigour, a development reported with a measure of alarm in the Home Office's regular surveys of 'Revolutionary Organizations in the United Kingdom'. On 2 September it was noted that the 'revolutionary tendencies of the local Councils of Action are becoming more pronounced'. A week later it was reported that the local Councils of Action were adopting revolutionary resolutions. They had the 'intention if not the power, of widening their scope'. Lambeth Council of Action was said to be advocating the formation of a Civil Guard; and in Wales there were moves to federate the local Councils. Brighton, where a Cycle Corps was to be established, and Coventry, were among those local Councils regarded as 'extremely active' in the report of 16 September. A week later it was reported that at Merthyr Tydfil and Cardiff the local Councils were 'almost frankly Soviets and ready for action of even the most sanguinary kind'.⁷

The local organization at Merthyr was probably more elaborate than that anywhere else in the country. Its constitution was expressly intended to provide the 'necessary guidance to commence the development of a new order of society', and it was drafted with some care since it was intended to 'outlast the mere occasion that was upon us'. A Central Council was provided for, to be composed of representatives of the labour organizations appointed at public

⁶ *Leicester Pioneer*, 20 August; Leeds Trades Council Minutes, 18 August (Sheepscar Library, Leeds); Manchester and Salford Trades and Labour Council 54th Annual Report, 1919-20, 4; *Labour Pioneer*, 19 August; Glasgow Trades Council minutes, 18 August and 8 September; ILP: Glasgow Federation Minutes, 13 August (Mitchell Library, Glasgow).

⁷ Home Office Intelligence Department: *Fortnightly Reports on Revolutionary Organizations in the U.K.* Nos. 70-73, 2, 9, 16, 23 September, Cabinet Papers 1830, 1848, 1862, 1885, Cab 24/111, in the Public Record Office, London.

mass meetings. Representatives would be replaced if they failed to attend meetings regularly. The local *Pioneer's* editorial (4 September) declared that the new Council was 'destined to be an important instrument for the emancipation of the workers'. Nightly meetings took place subsequently, the paper reported on 18 September, for the purpose of electing the representatives to the Central Council. In every case, it was noted, the meetings were 'remarkable for their representative nature; their frank recognition of mutual working class relationships and interdependence, and for the determination to co-operate to make the new body all that it promises in the industrial life in times of crisis and upheaval, in a decaying capitalist society'.

Merthyr Council of Action co-operated with the local Trades Council and the Irish Self-Determination League in holding a meeting on the Irish question, reported in the Merthyr *Pioneer* on 4 December. A circular was also issued to other local Councils in September, emphasizing that Russia, Ireland, and unemployment were all part of the same problem. Taken together these problems, it was suggested, 'threaten the existence of the capitalist system of production'.⁸

These initiatives were paralleled in Birmingham, where the local Council, established on 17 August (with some communist representation) took an increasingly radical line. On 8 September a resolution was adopted calling for a date to be fixed on which a strike would be called if peace had not by then been concluded with Russia. On 18 November W. P. Coates, of the 'Hands off Russia' Committee, addressed the Council executive, and it was agreed to attempt to convene a meeting of all local Councils 'to consider what steps shall be taken to enforce Peace and Trade with Russia'. An appropriate circular was approved and circulated and published in the *Birmingham Town Crier* on 20 November. Little came of the proposal, however, and there was no support for moves the following 11 February and 5 March to form a Council of Action to call a general strike to bring about peace with Russia and to protest against unemployment. The Trades

⁸ Home Office Intelligence Department: Report 71, 9 September.

Council's Annual Report noted that the Councils 'more or less soon became moribund'. The treasurer, in fact, had been left £5 out of pocket. Donations 'however small' were invited.⁹

Birmingham was not the only Council to urge an extension of the scope of the Councils, and a convention of the local Councils. Some sixty local Councils called for the inclusion of the Irish question in the Council's mandate (ADM/42). There were calls also for the inclusion of the question of unemployment and for action in regard to a multitude of other subjects: Labour Police (GEN/399), an International Council of Action (GEN/420), the dismissal of a head kitchen hand for wearing a union badge (GEN/439), fresh meat control (GEN/528), and inflation, pensions, and excess war profits (GEN/617).

After Ireland, however, the most widely canvassed proposal was the convocation of a national conference of local Councils of Action, as the Birmingham Council had suggested. Letters and resolutions were received from some thirty-five local Councils in support of such an initiative (ADM/41). Its strongest advocate was the North-East District Council of Action at Newcastle, which on 5 September sent a telegram to the National Council calling for another national conference to be held to keep the Council in session and to extend its mandate to Ireland and to the withdrawal of British troops overseas (GEN/542). Dissatisfied with the National Council's response, the North-East Council despatched a circular to every other local Council urging that such a conference be held. More than seventy Councils were reported to have replied to the circular and to have endorsed it (GEN/1114 and 1113, November 1920 and January 1921). Some wrote directly to the National Council urging that a conference be called (GEN/771, 837, 767). The Willesden Council was also reported to have called for a conference of local Labour bodies to discuss direct action to secure trade with Russia and to vote on the question of a general strike. Similar moves were reported from elsewhere, the *Herald* com-

⁹ Birmingham Trades Council minutes, 17 August (Public Library, Birmingham); Birmingham Trades Council, *Annual Report*, 1920, 10.

mented on 8 January 1921, and there was 'every indication that the Willesden experiment will have a widespread following'.

A week later, however, the same paper reported that the London Council of Action had rejected the proposal, while the Spen Valley Council, writing to the National Council with reference to the Birmingham and North-East proposals, assured it that 'we are still loyal to the National Council'. In reply the National Council wrote that it saw no good purpose at present in the scheme; a House of Commons debate was forthcoming, and the situation could thereafter be reviewed (GEN/894). The proposals lacked not only the backing of the relatively moderate National Council; they manifestly failed to win widespread rank and file support.

Indeed, with the exception of occasional local initiatives, the Councils uniformly failed to realise the hopes of those who saw them as embryonic Soviets. It rested with the rank and file, wrote the *Workers' Dreadnought* on 21 August, to see that the Councils did 'not become dead bodies, but that they infuse them with life and energy, so that they are really Revolutionary Councils, which will work for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of the Communist Republic'. It was 'essential that the revolutionaries should play their part in the creation of the new weapon', added the *Worker* a week later; it believed that the Councils, 'set up in a society in which the class struggle is intensifying, will be forced by the course of events to engage in activities which their promoters never contemplated'.

The working class of Western Europe, commented *Izvestiya* on 10 September, was 'beginning to move on to the path of real struggle with the bourgeois power of its countries'. The Councils of Action were evidence of the 'completely new character of the working class movement created now in capitalist countries' – although unfortunately Henderson and Co. were involved in them. Even Lenin was convinced that 'Bolshevism is growing among the English workers'; the establishment of the Council of Action had the 'same significance as the February revolution of 1917 had for us'. The English press had – correctly – declared the situation to be one of 'Dual Power'. The Mensheviks in the

Councils of Action (which, he pointed out, were Soviets, although not called such) would be obliged as in Russia to assist the path of the British workers to Bolshevik revolution.¹⁰

These views commanded little if any support within the National Council. Its function and aims, wrote Snowden, 'were to be confined to the specific and definite purpose of preventing war, and it was never intended that the Council of Action should be used to aid general revolutionary propaganda'. Hodges pointed out that the reasons which had brought the Council into existence were transient; there was 'no desire to destroy Parliamentary government, and there is no question of Soviet government'.¹¹ Communists and revolutionaries did indeed remain in a tiny minority not simply on the National Council, but in the local Councils as well.

Moreover, as the *New Statesman* noted on 21 August, the local Councils did 'not usually differ much from the existing Trades Councils and Local Labour Parties. The difference is . . . largely one of attitude rather than of personnel or organization.' In particular the Councils had been urged in the 17 August circular 'not in any way to usurp the powers of Trade Union Executives, especially so far as the withdrawal of labour is concerned'. There was no question at all, the *Herald* stated editorially on 19 August, of encroachment on the power of the trade union executives. C. T. Cramp wrote to the 'Hands off Russia' Committee reproving it for having advised miners to hold up the transport of coal to France in order to assist the Russian cause. 'As you are well aware', he wrote, 'I favour anything which can be done to cripple the attacks upon Russia at this or any other time, but this is being translated as an undue interference with the executive rights of other trade unions and was adversely commented upon at the meeting of the Council of Action which I attended last evening'. A Home Office Intelligence report upon the Councils noted that they were so far merely the

¹⁰V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii* (Moscow, 5th ed. 1958-65), vol. 41, 326, 283, 327, 283.

¹¹P. Snowden, *An Autobiography* (London 1938), II, 561-62.

Trades and Labour Councils with power to co-opt. Any attempt on their part to 'meddle in affairs outside the Polish question would arouse opposition from the bona-fide trade union branches'.¹²

It remains to consider the political inspiration of the Councils. To what extent did they represent, for those who established them, not simply popular resistance to the prospect of war but active solidarity with the Soviet regime?

AN 'APPEAL TO THE BRITISH NATION' which the *Herald* printed on 7 August drew attention to the fact that 'at the present time we can ill afford to spare even a few thousand men or a few million pounds from our depleted financial resources . . . Houses are lamentably short and the prime necessities of life becoming increasingly difficult to obtain'; war would 'drive us over the precipice of bankruptcy on the edge of which we now stand'. The people in every country 'want only to devote themselves more and more to rational and peaceful construction . . . We want peace — a real peace, a lasting peace, rather than endless wars and threats of wars'. The appeal was signed by Lansbury, Purcell, and Williams as well as by Clynes, Henderson, and Bevin. However divided Labour might be on the question of domestic policy, commented the *Birmingham Town Crier* on 20 August, there was 'complete unity on the question of peace'.

It was a sentiment by no means confined to the national leadership of the labour movement. The formation of the Council, wrote the *British Trades Union Review*, had been the outcome of a 'strong wave of emotion and a remarkable manifestation of zeal on the part of those who desire to see a state of universal peace'. An engineer wrote to his union's journal to point out that the majority of the people were 'absolutely sick of war and the after effects of war', and wanted only to 'get on with the reconstruction of the British Isles, to get on with the peace with all countries, including Russia'. This was in his opinion the 'sole reason why the

¹²Home Office Intelligence Department: Report 70, 2 September; Fortnightly Report on Revolutionary Organizations in the U.K. No. 68, 19 August, Cabinet paper 1793, Cab. 24/110.

workers have submitted to the policy of Direct Action and I think the only cause (for which) the workers as a whole will commence to act'. Glasgow Trades Council, indeed, instructed its delegate to the national conference to favour a policy of strict non-intervention. Shinwell commented: 'Let Russia and Poland fight it out.'¹³ As R. Palme Dutt wrote in the *Communist* on 19 August, the issue before them was 'not essentially a revolutionary class-issue but simply an expression of war-weariness and horror at the prospect of being dragged into another war'; the final outcome might be 'disappointing to those who have built high hopes upon it'.

Still further motives were involved. As a manifesto of a group of union officials and labour leaders, printed in the *Times* on 29 January, pointed out, the attempt to overthrow the Bolsheviks by force had failed and might fail again. The *New Statesman* at least believed that the blockade had probably done more than any other single factor to preserve the authority and prestige of the Bolsheviks in Russia. To raise the blockade, it suggested on 5 June, would be possibly the 'severest blow that Great Britain is capable of dealing to the Bolshevik regime'. As Clynes put it in the House of Commons on 11 August, neither Churchill nor the French government had succeeded in crushing Bolshevism by military force; perhaps it would be better to try some other method.

The resumption of trading relations would also help, it was thought, to relieve unemployment and reduce prices. This was particularly the theme of the demonstrations sponsored by the Council on 17 October. Henderson noted on the previous day in the *Times* that peace with Russia would be one immediate and practical way of dealing with the growing menace of unemployment, especially in the engineering, textile, clothing, and boot and shoe industries. It would materially relieve unemployment, Bromley promised in the *Leeds Weekly Citizen* on 22 August, and also have a considerable effect in reducing the price of commodities. An article in the same issue on 'The Government's Russian Policy: What it

¹³*British Trades Union Review*, August 1920, 1; *AEU Monthly Journal and Report*, October 1920, 85; Glasgow Trades Council minutes, 11 August 1920 (Mitchell Library, Glasgow).

Means to Us', spelt out these assurances in detail. The 'Hands off Russia' Committee itself had increasingly to rely upon such arguments.

A Soviet author has asserted that in this moment of crisis the British working class displayed a 'high political consciousness and great feelings of proletarian internationalism' in support of the Russian cause.¹⁴ J. T. Murphy (at the time a leading communist) acknowledged that the British labour movement in fact 'rejected the principles of the Soviet Revolution so far as its own development was concerned', and the Webbs noted that it could not be suggested that the widespread approval by the more active spirits in the trade union world of the proposed strike to stop British intervention was 'accompanied by any desire to set up in Great Britain the constitution which is believed to obtain in Moscow and Petrograd'.¹⁵

The Councils owed their existence, the Home Office Intelligence reports suggested, 'to the general fear of conscription that exists in the lower middle and working classes, and not to any tenderness for Russia'. If there were no question of conscription there would be a 'very feeble response to a strike-call to enforce recognition of the Soviet Government'.¹⁶ Local reports indicated that although the men would refuse to respond to calling up notices, they would support the Government in countering Bolshevik action. As Walton Newbold, shortly to become a Communist MP, recorded, the workers and the armed forces themselves were 'tired of the whole business of the war', but there was 'no desire to follow Russia. That plain, blunt fact we had to face'.¹⁷

THERE WAS LITTLE REASON TO SUPPOSE that the Council's willingness to contemplate direct action was designed or

¹⁴ P. Yakovlev: *Internatsionalnaya Solidarnost Trudyashchikhsya . . .* (Moscow 1964), 205. A revealing error is Yakovlev's belief that the Council of Action was the executive organ of the 'Hands Off Russia' Committee (204).

¹⁵ J. T. Murphy, *New Horizons* (London 1941), 203; S. and B. Webb, *History of Trade Unionism* (London 1926), 669.

¹⁶ Home Office Intelligence Department, Report 68, 19 August.

¹⁷ Typescript autobiography, chapter 'For Litvinov and Lenin', 9 (Newbold Papers, University Library, Manchester).

perceived as a deliberate repudiation of constitutional propriety. The need of the day, wrote Bundock in an ILP pamphlet published at this time, was 'not so much extra-constitutional action as some drastic action *in defence* of the constitution, with which Mr Lloyd George in his period of power has so seriously tampered'. The Russian intervention had in particular been a 'story of unconstitutionality . . . all done in secret. Each stage of it was engineered behind the backs of "the representatives of the people"'. Labour, he argued, 'so far from attacking the British constitution, is defending the constitution against those who would wreck it'.¹⁸ As the *Labour Leader* wrote editorially on 19 August, Labour's action had 'restored constitutional government in Great Britain', and 'reasserted the authority of Parliament over matters of war and peace'. It had been a 'great victory for constitutionalism'.

Moreover the Councils were 'generally . . . shy of Communists'.¹⁹ The newly-founded Communist Party immediately sought representation on the Council of Action, suggesting the co-option of two of its more prominent members. The Council considered this at its first meeting, but eventually decided against it and the party was not represented at the 13 August conference. Although two members of the Council were at that time members of the Communist Party (Purcell and Williams), they were only two in a body of some twenty-seven members.

The creation of the Council, wrote C. M. Roebuck in the *Communist* on 12 August, was a 'step on the road to the dictatorship of the proletariat', but that was not enough; never before had the workers been so solid in their opposition to war, so determined to resist militarism. 'We must make them actively enthusiastic for Communism.' In particular, communists must win the key positions on the local Councils in order to prevent the union and labour leadership 'capitulating at the critical moment'. They signally failed to do so.

The work of communists, wrote MacManus in the *Communist* on 19 August, was not for a political revolution

¹⁸C. J. Bundock, *Direct Action and the Constitution* (London 1920), 4, 5.

¹⁹Home Office Intelligence Department: Report 68, 19 August.

and a Labour government, 'but a social revolution with administration by Soviets or Workers' Councils. Your Local Councils of Action have potentialities which should be nourished and developed.' The paper noted, however, that even at the local level communists were not playing the principal part in organizing the local Councils. Indeed a week later MacManus and Inkpin, in a letter to communist party branches, were compelled to report that a large number of letters had reached them from branches, 'informing us that they are experiencing considerable difficulty in securing representation on the local Councils of Action'. Where they did secure representation they were more often the delegates of trade union branches than of the party as such. The party at this time, wrote its historian, was 'only able to issue revolutionary slogans, to give general advice. It was still too weak to play any decisive political role'.²⁰ It might also be remarked that its policies appeared to lack that widespread working class support which might have allowed it to play a more prominent role, whatever the strength of its organization.

If there was little in the inspiration of the Councils which was revolutionary and socialist, there was much that was middle class and pacifist. Many of the letters of support received by the National Council, for instance, came from religious and humanitarian bodies. Without doubt, noted Beatrice Webb, 'many non-Labour elements — all the middle class pacifists, and many middle class taxpayers — were grateful for the Labour Party's intervention', and believed that it had stemmed the drift towards war.²¹ Even the City, the *New Statesman* reported (14 August), shared the views of Labour. 'Everyone in England wants a settlement and peace.'

LANSBURY WAS CONVINCED THAT the action taken by the labour movement had 'stopped the proposed British intervention' by its display of working class solidarity,²² while the *New Leader* (13 October 1922) declared it had

²⁰T. Bell, *The British Communist Party* (London 1937), 71.

²¹*Diaries of Beatrice Webb 1912-24* (London 1952), 187.

²²G. Lansbury, *My Life* (London 1928), 257.

'compelled the abandonment of Mr Churchill's campaign of intervention. We brought the blockade to an end. We stopped the plans for interference in the Polish war.' The extent to which the Councils did in fact prevent British military intervention was perhaps less striking than these assertions suggested.

There is little doubt that the government was alarmed by the successful Soviet advance westwards into Poland. Viscount D'Abernon, who was despatched on a mission to the Polish capital at the end of July, noted in his memoirs that had Soviet forces taken Warsaw, almost certainly Bolshevism would have 'spread throughout Central Europe, and might well have penetrated the whole continent'. Such was the precarious nature of the situation that the mission decided to take up residence in its train, as a 'ready means of withdrawal in case of need'.²³

The British government had shown no inclination to intervene while the Polish offensive was in progress; but whatever its sympathies, it by no means followed that it was prepared to undertake the despatch of considerable numbers of British troops to Poland. On the contrary, the Cabinet and the French government were throughout agreed that this was out of the question. At a conference in Boulogne on 27–28 July, Lloyd George noted that the Cabinet was unanimously of the opinion that it was 'impossible to fight, as neither France nor England would stand any more fighting'. In England, he informed the French representatives, 'nobody wanted war, and nobody was disposed to send troops. The feeling . . . was that the Poles had made a mess of it, and had only themselves to thank for what had happened.' The two governments considered sending advisers and some supplies, and re-imposing the blockade; but the provision of troops, Millerand admitted, was impossible.²⁴

There was naturally considerable relief in government circles when the Poles themselves succeeded in restoring their military position. It was indeed only the government's evasive

²³Viscount d'Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace* (London 1929–30), II, 11, 20.

²⁴*Documents on British Foreign Policy* (London 1947–), First Series, vol. 8, 652, 731.

formulation of its Russian policy, and the presence of Winston Churchill in the Cabinet, which could convey the impression that a major British intervention was ever possible. This was certainly the theme of the Labour conference on 13 August. The government, Bevin declared, had 'two voices', that of Lloyd George and that of Churchill. Moreover, there were sinister forces at work in Europe which were 'straining every nerve to create a state of war with Russia for their own selfish ends'. The government, instead of repudiating such a movement, had 'sought to temporize perhaps in order to maintain unity with our Allies'. They could not, he said, 'allow France to be the master of our foreign policy'.

Indeed, so far from dictating policy to the government and preventing military intervention, a Liberal paper observed, they were 'faced perhaps for the first time in the history of the Labour movement with a categorical threat of Direct Action not in antagonism to the declared policy of the government of the day but in support of it'.²⁵ It was probably true, conceded the *New Statesman* (14 August), that Labour's action had no influence on the course of events, while the *Economist* (14 August) believed there was a 'good deal of make-believe about the whole business'. Labour's action was even termed an 'unscrupulous electioneering device' in the *Review of Reviews* (September 1920).

The prevention of direct military intervention, however, was only a part of the Council's self-imposed task. It had also been required by the 13 August conference to 'resist any and every form of military and naval intervention' and to oppose any agreement which committed Britain to the 'supply of munitions or other war material for any form of attack upon Soviet Russia'. The Council, reported the *Herald* on 21 August, was 'most carefully watching for, and will most certainly stop, any open transmission of munitions or troops from this country to Poland'. In this respect, it added, the 'war against Soviet Russia goes on . . . British Labour has not yet stopped it'.

Reports continued to reach the Council of suspected move-

²⁵*Round Table*, 1919-20, 857.

ments of munitions and supplies to Poland (MUN/9; ADM/30 x-xi). In its first report to the local Councils it stated that it had made exhaustive enquiries and was accumulating 'abundant information regarding the production and movement of all kinds of munitions, equipment and material of war . . . When the necessity for action is forced upon us, we shall have to prevent their production and movement as well as that of essential raw material . . . We call upon the workers, therefore, to hold themselves in readiness for any call to action which may be made' (MEM/31).

On 27 September a special sub-committee discussed the possibility of the Council 'taking action on the lines of its mandate with respect to the supply of munitions etc., for the use of Poland and General Wrangel' (ADM/20). The Council's conclusion emerged from its third report to the local Councils issued on 1 October (MEM/44): it had been greatly concerned about the supply of munitions and materials of war to Poland and General Wrangel, but felt it would be 'unfair to throw upon the transport workers the responsibility for stopping these supplies whilst acquiescing in other workers continuing to manufacture them. Then the difficulty arose of ascertaining the ultimate destination of munitions in the process of manufacture.' The difficulty of taking decisive action, moreover, had been 'accentuated by the threatened stoppage in the mining industry, which had during the last few weeks from the public point of view thrown the question of Russia into the background', as well as by the hope that the Russian-Polish negotiations at Riga would result in an early settlement.

The Council's response provoked dismay in some quarters. 'Frankly', wrote the *Communist* on 7 October, 'the National Council of Action has failed'. Its failure was the more disappointing in view of the unanimity and enthusiasm of the conference of 13 August. The Council was formed to prevent supplies and munitions being sent in support of the attack on Soviet Russia, which it was 'quite obviously not doing. Somehow, and from somewhere in this country, those supplies are being sent.' The Council had become, not a body 'ranging itself wholeheartedly on the side of the Russian workers' Republic because it is a workers' republic, but a collection of

pseudo-diplomats haggling about terms with which it has no concern and which are not germane to the issue'. Despite the efforts of the railway and transport workers in the various countries, the *Birmingham Town Crier* wrote on 8 October, 'great quantities of ammunition and guns continue to reach Poland'. Ships 'laden with war material are allowed without hindrance to leave the ports of Western Europe and Great Britain'. The Council was now, some argued, a 'Council of Inaction'.

The problem remained, however, as the Council explained in a reply to the local Council in Newcastle, that the 'facts and circumstances which called the Council into being and which made its action effective with regard to the threats of war-like measures against Russia, are altered enormously, and it is no use acting as though those facts were unchanged' (GEN/1116). The labour movement had been able to prevent open war with Russia, but it was 'very doubtful whether the Labour Movement is at all as unanimous in the taking of the similarly drastic steps to achieve peace with Russia' (GEN/756), or to prevent all exports of munitions to Poland. A general movement of a wider kind, the Labour Party executive reported, would 'not have met with the successful response that it was evident such an appeal would have commanded had open war been declared by the government early in August'. Open war had then been prevented. Thereafter 'public interest . . . waned considerably'.²⁶

Only about half of the unions could in fact be persuaded to pay the half-penny levy agreed upon at the 13 August conference.²⁷ A special sub-committee meeting on 20 August was informed that 45 affiliated societies had responded, but that no reply had been received from a further 169 (ADM/18). A week later it was agreed to issue a second appeal, and by 16 October 55 unions had made their contribution. Some 161, however, had still not done so. Eventually 112 unions were prevailed upon to contribute £9,300.²⁸ The levy, had all affiliated societies duly paid it, should have realised more than £4,000 in excess of this sum (ADM/31).

²⁶Labour Party, *Annual Conference Report*, 1921, 18.

²⁷*British Trades Union Review*, November 1921, 2.

²⁸*Trades Union Congress Report*, 1921, 85.

The Home Office Intelligence reports suggest that the Councils movement was steadily losing the enthusiastic support upon which it had earlier been able to rely. On 30 September it was noted that 'as the imaginary danger of conscription recedes, the uselessness of the National Council of Action seems to be affecting the workers generally; they are losing interest in the local councils'. On 21 October it was stated that the attendance at demonstrations called by the Council was much smaller than had been the case the previous August. The speakers 'dealt with unemployment and the miners' strike rather than with Russia', interest in Russian affairs appeared to be waning, apathy was widespread now that the extremists were unable to conjure up the bogey of conscription, and the movement was 'in the national sense, moribund. There is little doubt that if a general strike were called to enforce peace with Russia, the outcome would be a fiasco.'²⁹

These reports accorded with the communications now received by the National Council from its local affiliates; one no longer intended to hold meetings, another wrote that a number of its members were of the opinion that its meetings were a waste of time; some were wound up, pleading 'the present low state of the workers class-consciousness' (GEN/191).

Brailsford was still ready in 1921 to assert that the work of the Councils of Action was 'far from being completed'. Labour could 'not be satisfied with this negative result. Peace is not concluded. The Soviet government is not recognized.' There was no serious prospect, however, of the Council again assuming the initiative in such matters. As Wedgwood, a member of the National Council, pointed out, the Council 'must use the machinery of general consent; and general consent is only rarely available'. Only extraordinary circumstances had created the Council and persuaded the labour movement to entrust it with extensive powers. War and the threat of war had made this a special case.³⁰ The subsidiary

²⁹Home Office Intelligence Department: *Fortnightly Report on Revolutionary Organizations in the U.K.* Nos. 74, 77, 82, 30 September, 21 October, 25 November, Cabinet Paper 1908, 1997, Cab 24/112: Cab 24/115.

³⁰*Labour International Handbook*, 1921, ed. R. P. Dutt (London 1921), 164; *Review of Reviews*, September 1920.

objectives which the Council was also pledged to achieve aroused no similar enthusiasm or unanimity at either the local or the national level. The Council's role necessarily became a purely propagandist and an increasingly marginal one.